

## Gender and Disability in Male-Dominated Occupations

**Citation for published version:**

Sang, K, Richards, J & Marks, A 2016, 'Gender and Disability in Male-Dominated Occupations: A Social Relational Model', *Gender, Work and Organization*, vol. 23, no. 6, pp. 566-581.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12143>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1111/gwao.12143](https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12143)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Gender, Work and Organization

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## **Gender and disability in male dominated occupations: a social relational model**

### **Abstract**

Evidence from male dominated sectors points to high levels of disability and the disabling nature of working environments. However, research of this nature assumes a medical model of disability not accounting for social construction of disability or the experiences of disabled employees. Using data from seven focus groups (n=44) and semi-structured interviews with professional transport employees with life-long hidden neurological "impairments", including dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, ADD/ADHD and Asperger syndrome (n=22), this paper explores the experiences of men and women working in a sector traditionally dominated by men, the transport industry. Key themes include homosociality, public- private divide and the impact of changing work practices. Further, the data revealed how those with hidden "impairments", in part, construct their identities in relation to both non-disabled colleagues and those considered stereotypically representing disability (wheelchair users). This study furthers understandings of the relationality of gender and disability in the workplace, and the experiences of disabled employees.

Key Words: Gender; Disability; Masculinity; Social Relational Model

### **Introduction**

A growing body of literature critically examines men's experiences of work and constructions of masculinity, revealing importance of social networks, homosociality and a public-private divide to maintaining men's dominance in the workplace (Bradley, 2007; Collinson and Hearn, 1994). Examination of men's experiences shows gender practices privilege certain men over others while maintaining women's inequality (Dahlkild-Öhman and Eriksson, 2013; Sang *et al.*, 2014). Further, there have been calls to understand the social relational aspects of "impairment", disability and ableism within organisational contexts (Williams and Mavin, 2012). Despite evidence of gendered aspects of

disability (Haynes, 2012; Warner and Brown, 2011), its relationship with gender and employment remains under-examined in the literature, accounts of experiences of disabled employees are relatively scarce in the disability studies literature. This situation is more stark within the work and employment studies literature which is already remiss in its consideration of disabled workers, despite evidence of the need for disabled workers to undertake additional work in the form of proving capability (Roulstone, 1998) and emotional labour (Church *et al.*, 2007). Further, efforts to understand disability and employment must ensure research is sensitive to the differing needs and experiences of those with a range of "impairments" (Richards, 2012). Drawing on feminist studies, Thomas (1999) has reflected on the epistemological value of understanding individual experiences of disabled people as reflections of the macro social world. Further, dis/ability and the fe/male cannot be viewed separately or as dichotomies, given their relational nature (Goodley, 2013). These approaches are consistent with models of identity, which have moved away from viewing individuals and identities as separate from the social world (Collinson, 2003). Rather, identities are relational and socially constructed, with the workplace a key site where this occurs (Denissen, 2010; Dick and Cassell, 2004; Kimmel, 2004). Through social relational lenses of disability and gender, this study examines gendered working experiences of employees with a particular range of life-long hidden neurological "impairments" in a sector traditionally dominated by men - the UK transport industry. It reveals how social relational models can expose distinctions between "impairment" and disability through disabling gendered and ableist working practices. The use of language is key to examining disability. As such we draw distinction between "impairment" (or those designated with "impairments") and disability, taken to be a social relationship and a product of working practices. We acknowledge that the term "impairment" is contentious for some disabled people (hence the use of quotation marks), however it remains in standard use. Further, the paper adheres to the terms 'disabled people' or 'disabled employees', rather than 'people with disabilities'. The former terms are preferred within the national context of the study (UK) and are consistent with social and social relational models of

disability, while 'person with disabilities' is more consistent with medical models of disability (Shakespeare, 2006).

We begin by setting out current theoretical understandings of disability and how these relate to gender, with emphasis on social relational models of disability and hegemonic masculinity. This leads to a discussion of the limited literature on disability, gender and employment, identifying the workplace as a key site where disability is constituted. The qualitative methods employed in the current study are described and the findings set out.

### **Conceptualising disability**

Contemporary theorists are revisioning the ontology of disability to consider how it is a constructed difference formed through practices or interactions between people. This approach is called the social relational model, whereby disability is not contingent on an "impairment"; rather it is relational and dependent on relationships with others (Thomas, 1999; Watson, 2002). Drawing parallels with feminist conceptualisations of gender, Thomas (1999) argues disability as social oppression, whereby those designated with "impairments" are oppressed by those designated without "impairments". Therefore, through the social relational model, disability has political, emotional, material, economic, structural and personal dimensions (Thomas, 2004) opening avenues for exploring how the oppression and marginalization disabled people report is the product of social relationships (Goodley, 2013). For example, for some disabled people, disability is not part of their self-identity; it is a product of discrimination and prejudice, seeing themselves as "normal" unless treated differently by others (Watson, 2002). Further work is required to understand how disability is formed in particular contexts, including workplaces (Thomas, 1999).

Much of the disability literature focuses on visible "impairments", with less attention to hidden "impairments". The educational literature can provide insights, where efforts are made to move beyond assumptions that a social "impairment" resides within a child, to an understanding of a constructed difference between an assumed (and unexamined) set of "normal" social behaviours and

so called social “impairment” (Molloy and Vasil, 2002). The adoption of a social relational model allows a move beyond individualistic psychological and pathologising models of disability towards understandings of the construction of disability (Williams and Mavin, 2012) and emotional well-being of disabled people (Liddiard, 2014). Importantly, social relational models of disability do not ‘deny the category “disabled people”, but argue a classification must be historically situated, socially composite and seen as part of a multiple identity’ (Watson, 2002, p. 513). Campbell (2008) further suggests studies of disability should include ableist practices, which disable, for example, the need to disclose to receive adjustments to working arrangements (Onken and Slaten, 2000).

Disability theorising occurs alongside efforts to critique the naturalisation of gender and “race” (Bumiller, 2008). Efforts have been made to understand ableist normativity, whereby disability is constructed in contrast to socially constructed ableist norms (Campbell, 2008; Goodley, 2013). In addition, forms of ‘other’, including ethnicity and gender, converge with disability to occupy a space, which is outside the white, able, heterosexual male. As previously identified, there are similarities in the construction of gender and disability, with disabled men and women occupying different social spaces (Thomas, 2004).

### **Conceptualising gender**

Conceptualising gender follows a similar path to disability with efforts moving towards understanding how working practices are gendered, resulting in persistent gender inequality. Understanding gender practices is key to social relational models of gender (Connell, 2012). Increasingly, interest has turned to understanding men’s gendered working lives, revealing men’s dominance to be temporal and contextual (Dahlkild-Öhman and Eriksson, 2013). Further there are professional penalties for men who attempt to challenge gendered norms in relation to the household division of labour (Sang *et al.*, 2014). However, gendered working experiences of men remain under examined, although efforts have been made to understand certain men’s persistent dominance, as described below.

Gramsci's (1971) conceptualisation of hegemony and the naturalisation of the dominant group's dominance has informed gender theorising, particularly, Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1996). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) define hegemonic masculinity as 'the currently most honoured way of being a man' (p. 832). Specifically, within Connell's (1996) framework, gender is socially constructed and hegemonic masculinity is a 'configuration of gender practice' (p. 77). Gender is relational, reliant on false dualism between men and women and marginalised masculinities, such as gay men (Barrett, 1996; Collinson and Hearn, 1994). Although hegemonic masculinity is contextualised and shifting within modern Western society, Bradley (2007) defines it as "'macho': tough, competitive, self-reliant, controlling, aggressive and fiercely heterosexual' (p. 47). Further, research reveals the importance of networks and social relationships to contemporary practices of hegemonic masculinity (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). These alliances are homosocial, as they reinforce dominance of practices of masculinity, and maintain certain men's control of valuable resources, thus excluding women and marginalised masculinities (Martin and Collinson, 1999). A further aspect of homosociability at work, is a form of intimacy between men, part of which is around humour and jokes (Fisher and Kinsey, 2014). Humour is a key aspect of workplace relations (Grugulis, 2002) and culture (Holmes and Marra, 2002). Further work has demonstrated importance of homosocial reproduction to maintenance of certain men's dominance, to the detriment of men who are unable or unwilling to conform to gendered standards (Sang *et al.*, 2014), including those who are disabled (Connell, 2002).

Conceptualising gender as social relational provides opportunities for the analysis of how the social places of man and woman are related to the "doing gender" of masculinity and femininity (Powell *et al.*, 2009; West and Zimmerman, 1987), thus avoiding critiques of gender essentialism (Schippers, 2007). Social relational models of gender allow for analyses of everyday social practices which reproduce gender, including employment (Connell, 2012). However, further research is required to understand the experiences of those who transgress hegemonic masculinity. In particular, much of

the current, limited, work on masculinities in organisations, focuses on non-white, gay, working class men.

### **Masculinity, disability and work**

Work remains gendered within the UK, with the persistence of a gender pay gap (ONS, 2016). Gender inequalities in pay may be worse for women in highly skilled work, in part due to uptake of family friendly working (Grönlund and Magnusson, 2016). Within male dominated occupations women continue to report discrimination, including fewer opportunities for skill development, lack of access to key social network and sexist stereotypes (Powell and Sang, 2015). There is some evidence that men who challenge gender norms face considerable penalty in terms of their well-being (Sang et al., 2014). However, disability remains rarely examined in the context of gender and work (Mik-Neyer, 2015).

Within the UK disabled people are less likely to be in employment than non-disabled people (Labour, Force Survey, 2012). Further, disability within employment is gendered (Krefting, 2003) with white men less likely to experience disabling functional limitations in relation to "impairments", than women (Warner and Brown, 2011). Despite research identifying relationships between constructions of gender, particularly masculinity, and ill health (Courtenay, 2000; O'Campo *et al.*, 2004; Pilgeram, 2007), there is a paucity of research on gendered experiences of disabled employees (Haynes, 2012; Muzio and Tomlinson, 2012). Such paucity may be related to the relatively low numbers of disabled men and women in employment. Where research does exist, it frequently conflates sex and socially constructed gender (Bird and Rieker, 1999). The following section sets out what is known about interactions between gender and disability in the sphere of employment. We draw on broader critical disabilities studies literature to conceptualise ontology of disability, and its relationship to masculinities at work.

As Watson (2002) highlights, despite a disabled identity being used as a political organising tool, disability is both heterogeneous and contested. Disability has a greater impact on masculinity than other identities (i.e. femininity), because masculinity is continually contested and in need of proving (Ostrander, 2008), through the accrual of masculine capital, which disabled men may find problematic (Wilde, 2004). As Woodhams et al (2015) demonstrate, disabled men face a greater pay penalty than other marginalised groups, including women. Indeed, there is a tension between hegemonic masculine traits of independence and autonomy and the need for assistance of others necessitated by "impairments" (Shuttleworth *et al.*, 2012). For men with visible "impairments", gendered understandings of work and disability can result in being associated with feminised traits such as helplessness (Mik-Neyer, 2015). While the limited workplace research has focussed on physical "impairments", gendered aspects of an autistic spectrum disorder diagnosis has begun to receive theoretical attention through drawing on social models of both gender and disability (Cheslack-Postava and Jordan-Young, 2012), although not in relation to employment. Experiences covered in the literature, focus on men whose "impairments" prevent labour market participation, while those that gain employment express greater pride in their identity and a change in their approach to masculinity (Wilde, 2004).

For men designated with "impairments" there are implications not only for employability, but also employment aspirations. Butler (2014) identified men with stammers reported avoidance of typically masculine occupations, such as architecture and construction professions. Further, men with stammers agreed with employer statements that their voices were not appropriate for the jobs they wish to pursue. Hidden disabilities may have a gendered component, for example women reporting difficulty combining child-care with additional work in the evenings to accommodate a child's "impairment", such as dyslexia (Skinner, 2011). However, those engaged in professional work may have access to flexible working patterns which reduce the need for absence and adjustments (Dewa and Lin, 2000; Munir *et al.*, 2005). Where gender, disability and employment have been examined, the focus remained on physical "impairments" which make the body visible (Harrison, 2015; Haynes,



2012). Those with hidden "impairments" may be able to "pass" as non-disabled, and accrue privilege in contrast to those with visible "impairments" (Brown and Boardman, 2011), thus demonstrate greater congruence with hegemonic masculinity. Given the range of impairments which may be hidden, or invisible, it is important to note that effects within employment are likely to be heterogeneous. However, much of the extant literature does not explore experiences of disabled men (or men designated with "impairments") and employment.

## **Methods**

Through the theoretical lens of social relational models of both gender and disability, this paper explores experiences of men and women working in a male dominated sector, the transport industry. Experiences are taken to be the experiences and meanings research participants attach to particular phenomena (Smith, 2004). Disability and health concerns are particularly prevalent within this sector, due to high levels of stress and violence (Essenberg, 2003). The study focused on professional employees with a range of hidden "impairments", namely dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, ADD/ADHD and Asperger syndrome (see Table 1). Co-diagnosis of one of the above impairments is common, as such "impairments" share many diagnostic traits, such as problems with memory and organisation skills. The range of "impairments" focussed upon are congruent with the priorities of an emergent body of literature on neurodiversity (e.g. Armstrong, 2010; Hendrickx, 2010). The study focussed on white-collar workers as previous research has suggested that professional employees may be less affected by disability due to flexible work schedules (Dewa and Lin, 2000; Munir et al., 2005), although there may be greater gender inequality within highly skilled or professional work (Grönlund and Magnusson, 2016). Focussing on professional workers in a male dominated sector allows for a gendered analysis of previously identified relative advantages for this group of workers.

The overall approach involved convenience sampling for focus groups and interviews. All participants were self-selecting and recruited through the membership email list of a UK transport trade union. For the focus groups, a sample of the trade union's membership was emailed requesting volunteers

with an interest in neurological "impairments" to take part in focus groups. The focus group sample was based on the geographical location of the funder's offices in London and York. Interviewees were recruited using the full trade union's membership list. Participants were also recruited from focus groups, with ten interviewees agreeing to take further part in our study (see Table X). Both the focus group and interview samples reflect the range of workplaces within the transport industry, including publicly and privately run transport organisations.

The focus groups were used to identify understandings of employee attitudes to such "impairments". Importantly, focus groups may provide a forum for participants to talk about sensitive topics (Greenbaum, 2000). Focus groups were used to explore workplace experiences of those who self-identified as having a neurological "impairment"; roles and experiences of line managers; potential roles of trade unions in supporting employees and line managers; as well as knowledge of neurodiversity. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview schedule which covered; experiences of neurologically impaired employees, factors affecting disclosure, sources of support within and outside the workplace. Consistent with the relational model of disability we identify the "impairments" participants disclosed.

Focus groups and interviews were conducted by the authors, all experienced qualitative researchers. The use of semi-structured interview schedule allowed for consistency, while allowing flexibility for respondents to explore issues most salient to their experiences. All but two interviews were recorded and transcribed. Two respondents, reluctant to be interviewed verbally, expressing a preference to be interviewed via email. For some participants, preference was related to disability, for example, discomfort in speaking over the telephone, or the peripatetic nature of their work. Ethical approval was secured from authors' institution. All respondents were fully informed of the purpose of the study and a right to withdraw. In addition, research participants were provided information of support organisations and details of trade union representatives trained in relation to such "impairments".

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service, and imported into NVivo to manage and code the data. Template analysis was used, which allows for a priori codes to be identified from the literature and the incorporation of post-hoc codes arising from the data (King, 2004). Template analysis is useful for managing large qualitative data sets of both interviews and focus groups (Berta *et al.*, 2010).

The sample consisted of data from seven focus groups (n = 44) and interviews with neurologically impaired employees (n= 22). Tables 1 and 2 provide details of focus group and interview respondents. The UK transport industry employs a varying range of skilled workers, yet the focus of this research article is white-collar professional employment, a particular group of workers increasingly subject to precarious employment and work intensification (Morris and Farrell, 2007). The average age of focus group respondents was 49, most (n=35) identified as men and 12 disclosed an “impairment”. Keen not to be intrusive, during interviews we requested only details related to the hidden “impairment” and relevant job details. Interviewees were asked about disclosure. As can be seen in Table 2, six participants had not disclosed to their employer, yet eleven disclosed to their line manager and five reported disclosing their “impairment” to both line managers and colleagues. We did not ask for details concerning, for example, age. However, interviews suggested interviewees were on average 45 and 50 years old. Data from women respondents are included as their position as outsiders in male dominated sectors help reveal gendered working practices (Sang *et al.*, 2014).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

## Findings

The following section presents the theoretically informed themes which guided data analysis. We begin by setting out aspects of career experiences and progression, including roles of

homosociality and public private divide, which are key to conceptualisations of hegemonic masculinity. Analysis then moves to the disabling aspects of changing organisation of work. This section finishes with an examination of how disabled men constructed difference in relation to disability. Given diversity of experiences across hidden neurological "impairments", differences are drawn out as appropriate.

#### *Career experiences and progression*

Previous work has identified how individuals diagnosed with hidden "impairments", such as Asperger syndrome, struggle to secure employment (Richards, 2012). Respondents in this study reported similar difficulties, for example, one respondent from Focus Group 6 (London) argued recruitment difficulties can become evident while attempting to complete application forms (for those with dyslexia). Within the current occupational context, respondents also reported difficulties completing skills specific tests during selection, for example requiring additional time. There was a sense amongst some respondents that career progression had suffered as a result:

*I could go a lot further in this company. Every time I fill in an application form... get stuck. I have to write things down, and I am not sure if it is correctly spelt. They think it is gibberish. ... What is holding me back is that I have to wait longer than everybody else, as I have to get that niche position that I can get in, and they say I am the right guy for the right job. You don't get a chance. (London, Focus Group 6).*

Respondents across focus groups and interviews recalled experiences where "impairments" could result in serious consequences, including demotion and eventual loss of job. For example, Anna (female, dyslexia and dyscalculia) had been unable to accommodate financial duties into her supervisory role, and was facing a demotion to customer services assistant.

Previous research has suggested men's domination in male dominated workplaces is in part achieved through gendered working practices which restrict key tasks to men (Sang *et al.*, 2014). Within the current study, similar gender practices were seen, although this time they can also be seen as ableist

practices. Respondents reported self-imposed task restriction, in they were not undertaking tasks which may enhance career prospects, for example, not applying for more senior positions due to concerns over completing paper work, or giving presentations. This restriction may be imposed by managers, as with Anna's demotion to a less skilled customer services assistant role, or self-imposed, as Sue describes below:

*I'm constantly doubting myself. I don't put myself out there in terms of you know letting my boss know that I'm capable of doing more... I think I fear making mistakes ...So, because of that I don't put myself forward for ... more responsibilities which could lead on to you know promotion.... I'm not a big public speaker and I don't do well in presentations you know. So I avoid certain situations if I can put it that way... (Female, Dyslexia, interview).*

While task restriction may affect career development prospects, it may also result in social isolation at work. David (1) details his line manager's reluctance to allocate specific tasks to him has resulted in his social isolation from his colleagues, as he is working on a different project to the colleagues he shares an office with:

*I feel very isolated from the rest of the team even though we are all sat next to each other. You know, they're ... everybody else in the team is concerned with GIS [current project] which I can't do. You know, these are people who've got degrees in GIS and have done it for 10 years and I can't pick that up overnight. (Male, Asperger syndrome).*

From David (1) above, it can be seen that social isolation can occur where an employee's "impairment" may affect the speed with which they can learn a new skill. However, isolation can also result from social interactions within the workplace.

#### *Homosociality and humour*

Data presented here suggests homosociality can be seen in the male dominated transport industry, where respondents reported social isolation and exclusion from informal networks. This isolation was

identified by participants through discussions of humour, both in terms of being "laughed at" and difficulty engaging in "office humour". A number of respondents expressed concern over embarrassment and fear of being laughed at, as illustrated below:

*You know, you don't want an issue that you have being sort of open knowledge...I don't want to be the butt of office jokes or office gossip basically. (Sue, female, dyslexia, interview).*

A number of men described reluctance to reveal their "impairment" due to concerns that they would be laughed at by colleagues. Further, as the focus group excerpt below illustrates, respondents recalled situations where dyslexic colleagues and those with post-traumatic stress disorder were mocked:

*I have heard a lot of people ask questions about trains, one guy asked and my colleague said, 'can't you read, it's on the board!' I just thought, 'how ignorant'. I have seen a colleague who has resigned. Since then, my boss has been saying 'he is dyslexic this' and so on. When I object, he jokes about different conditions and things. It is almost like he thinks I am joking. In the team where I work, people mock post-traumatic stress disorder. (London, Focus Group 3).*

Some participants in the current study reported difficulty with humour as a social aspect of work both humour and informal social interaction. For example, those with Asperger syndrome reported difficulties understanding, and being able to participate in, small talk and office humour:

*I don't like small talk. I don't really join in with the jokey side of things much. I wish I can be good at that. I'm quite serious. I'm quite straight to the point generally on stuff. (John, Male, Asperger syndrome).*

Another respondent in Focus Group 7 (male, Asperger syndrome) recalled a situation where colleagues had failed to understand his difficulty with an office joke and how he has developed a strategy for managing uncomfortable social situations at work:

*Someone made a joke last year which I was very offended by. People tell me it was a joke but I didn't see that. I switched off my mike [microphone at the desk] and told the customer to wait a moment, turned around and hurled profanities at him. I apologised an hour later, but even to this day he still*

*had this real grudge. Trying to explain is not easy, but I let it go, it is not easy though. I know what makes me tick now, and I know to walk away.*

However, disabled men were not always excluded or disadvantaged by homosocial behaviour. While securing employment was problematic for a number of disabled men in the current study, some older men were able to mobilise their social and work networks with other men to find jobs.

*You know what it is like, you have a day off, and I thought, oh, I'll just ring up a friend of mine who I used to work with and have a chat. He said, 'Oh, we're desperate. We want a guy like you. Why don't you apply? There's a job going here.' 'Yeah.' I said it's not really me ... He said, 'Don't worry. Apply for it'. (James, Male, Dyslexia).*

The above quote illustrates that for some men, who report disablement related to their "impairments", were able to overcome recruitment difficulties with help of other men who were aware of their "impairments". In contrast, Chris (male, dyspraxia, possible dyslexia, ADD) felt informal recruitment was no longer evident in the sector and may result in difficulties for younger entrants with hidden "impairments" seeking entry into employment. Chris's quote suggests a perception that recruitment practices have been formalised within the transport sector and may limit opportunities for recruitment through homosociality:

*I think if I graduated now, it would be a lot tougher to get through that process and in terms of getting casual work in that way.*

#### *Public/private divide*

Participants recounted how their "impairment" affected both working lives and personal lives, with associated effects on relationships. For example, one respondent from Focus Group 5 (London) reported this range of hidden "impairments" had affected his marriage, resulting in divorce. Further, respondents were able to clearly identify examples of the need to rely on support from partners or broader social networks, in order to manage working lives:

*I struggled like anything because I had to write the minutes... And I really struggled. I used to sit at home and it took me hours to do it with my wife helping me. And then I used to find then, after that I thought, 'This is ridiculous.' Find any excuse possible not to do that. (James, Male, Dyslexia).*

Terry (male, dyslexia, interview) recounted how his close colleagues and partner helped with work related tasks:

*I ask a colleague who was sitting next to me or something. Or email things, send them to my wife and get her to read it for me.*

Other respondents recounted experiences of relying on support from outside work to manage workload. For these respondents, there was no clear distinction between work and non-work, or public versus private lives.

#### *The changing organisation of work*

A key theme emerging from the data was the changing organisation of work within the UK transport industry and how this disables those with "impairments". Sue (Female, dyslexia, interview) revealed regular reorganisation of teams can be disabling, due to changes in working relationships. Specifically, Sue had to rebuild relationships with each team move, and this was problematic in terms of disclosing her "impairment" to her line manager:

*So every year you could be working for one person, and then in a year later you're working for someone completely different and you have to start from a fresh you know getting to know the person, building rapport and trusting them...*

As the above quote illustrates, personal relationships between line managers and disabled employees are perceived to be key to provision of appropriate support. However, regular changes to working relationships destabilise sources of support. Changes to the organisation of work were also believed to extend to how individuals are expected to perform their job. As the quote below illustrates, such changes focus on greater expectations in regard to forming and maintaining social relationships at work, for example, performance appraisal related to good working relationships, which may be



particularly difficult for people with hidden "impairments", such as Asperger syndrome (Richards, 2012):

*After our restructure, we have had some new criteria of performance. Being accountable, getting on with people etc. It sounds as if someone is going to come along and say, 'you haven't fulfilled the criteria of getting on with people'. (Focus Group 7).*

In contrast, some participants felt engineering cultures may be more suited to those whose "impairment" is associated with difficulties engaging in social interaction within the workplace. Specifically, engineering was seen to traditionally rely on technical skills rather than interpersonal skills:

*[Colleagues say] Oh, yeah, Darren is a sort of person who likes to get on, on his own. And it's always been, people always been able to accommodate that ... I actually believe that, you know, an engineering task probably a great many if not the majority of engineering task, no, you don't need to have these social skills... (Darren, Male, (undiagnosed) Asperger syndrome).*

Respondents also referred to impact of broader changes to the organisation of work within the UK transport sector, and how changes can disable employees with "impairments". One example of came from Focus Group 5 where respondents considered not only change from public railways to private companies, but how this reduced the size of organisations and the range of employment opportunities available to impaired employees:

*One change I have noticed in British Rail, which is a very big organisation, if you accidentally lost a foot, they would give you something else to do. With a lesser number of roles in an organisation, and [Company Name] culture comes from the engineering side, from contractors, rather than a public industry, that they have a slightly less inclusive approach.*

Further, respondents reflected that the process of privatisation resulted in regular changes in company ownership, with reduced interest in investing in staff development.

The reorganisation of the transport sector was expanded on by participants to consider the effects on those with hidden "impairments". Specifically, the changing organisation of work was seen to have led to lack of flexibility in allocation of tasks, which may expose difficulties faced by those with hidden "impairments". Examples of difficulties included safety practices on stations where all employees now need depth perception on platforms:

*When you had more than the minimum numbers on the stations, some of those positions could be for staff who have restrictions of some kind, so you might have staff that couldn't work on platforms, who were primarily in the ticket office (London Focus Group 1)*

In addition, participants reflected on increased need for all employees to be able to engage with written materials:

*If you had a word difficulty, you used to be able to phone people up to do your job. You had to have someone read the special notices or manual to you. Now, everyone is expected to deal with things in the same way, which usually involves an email with quite small writing on it... (Focus Group 5).*

Participants felt financial cuts imposed on the transport industry had resulted in further changes which disabled employees with hidden "impairments". The quote below illustrates this point, specifically, that cuts have resulted in fewer staff available and removal of flexible work arrangements to accommodate disabled staff:

*Unfortunately, where they have cut back staff, a lot of those locations that had medically restricted positions no longer do, because all the rotas, at some point or other, you will be [on] minimum numbers, or required to do a task that is no longer suitable for medically restricted persons... (London Focus Group1).*

As such, across the data it was evident that the changing organisation of work in the UK transport sector had resulted in a lack of flexibility. This included increased formalisation of processes,

fragmentation of train companies and austerity measures, resulting in increased rigidity of the allocation of work, which may be problematic for disabled employees.

### *Constructing difference*

Participants in focus groups and interviews reflected on the relationship between hidden and visible "impairments" (specifically mobility). There was some concern those with hidden (or non-visible disabilities) were not recognised as in need of additional support:

*The way people relate to people with disabilities, who "look fine", is a reflection on how people relate to other people. The assumption that if you behave in any way different, there is something wrong with you and they don't want to be around you. If you get a company who can deal with difference in general, they can deal with those of us who are "quirky" (!) (York Focus Group 4).*

Further, the data reveals participants reflected on their own status as "disabled" by relating experiences and "impairments" to other disabled people. There was a sense from some participants that colleagues with visible "impairments" were accommodated more readily by employers. Further the quote illustrates that hidden "impairments" must be revealed for accommodations to be made.

*If I was in a wheelchair, the company would provide parking spaces, lifts, fire escape drills. With my dyslexia, which has been out there for 20-30 years, it is not recognised... If I was in a wheelchair and need to get to the third floor, they would build a bloody ramp. I am passionate about this, it narks me. You can't even stand up and say you want something done, as people go, 'I didn't know he had that! Did you know?' It is none of their business, you have to keep your mouth shut and get on with it. It is the forgotten problem (London Focus Group 5).*

One participant, Robert, was reluctant to identify as "disabled" despite recalling numerous incidents of the effect of his "impairment" on his working life. Specifically, Robert felt disability referred to visible "impairments", for example, wheelchair use. Robert explained disabled people were:

*Those who have a genuine need. And so, I don't like using the disability title because I think... I feel like it's taking away maybe the attention from other people. You know, I always think they're far more needy people than me out there. (Robert, Male, Asperger syndrome).*

For one focus group participant, post-traumatic stress disorder interacted with (self- diagnosed) dyslexia to make experience of work complex and resulted in need to move from a full time contract, to part time employment. The quote reveals the complex interactions between gender and disability, particularly where an employee reports multiple "impairments" which affect employment:

*[I] was on the train that crashed [detail removed]. Woke one week later in hospital, and took me a year to recover. During that time, I realised things weren't right mentally. I now work in [name of town removed] with a consultancy. Have to work part time. Started at three hours, then five, then down to three. I seem to be managing. I have been reading the dyslexia information. These are problems I have, but I have never been diagnosed. It was all due to post-trauma from the crash. It is slightly different but similar conditions. (Male, York Focus Group 4).*

The findings presented here underscore the importance of understanding the gendered experiences of disability and "impairment" in the workplace. Specifically, the data reveals the complexity of disabled men's experiences of employment.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

By drawing on two related theoretical developments, the social relational models of both gender and disability, the data presented here reveal how working practices within the male dominated transport sector are both gendered and ableist. The study extends theoretical understandings of men's gendered experiences of employment, and the mechanisms by which a hierarchy of masculinities is maintained. Specifically, the data suggests, within this context, certain men are privileged over others. For those with hidden "impairments", ableist working practices may result in "disability" with implications for career progression and social relationships at work. Although limited, the extant

literature suggests disabled men may face exclusion from particular forms of work as their "impairment" is seen as incompatible with occupational and societal norms (Butler, 2014).

However, the picture is complex for disabled men and women, for example, the effects of hidden "impairments" are not homogenous. While Woodhams et al (2015) have demonstrated the quantitative disadvantage reported by disabled men, the current study demonstrates varied experiences. The data presented here suggests working practices around homosociality, including the use of humour at work, are gendered and ableist practices, which serve to disable individuals whose "impairments" render them the object of jokes, or unable to participate in office humour. Humour at work is a gender practice, underpinning dominant forms of masculinity, to the detriment of women (Farrell, 2003; Fisher and Kinsey, 2014; Powell and Sang, 2015). The data presented suggests humour is a practice which helps to form a hierarchy of masculinities in the workplace, marginalising non-hegemonic men and women unable, or unwilling, to participate, for example, those with Asperger syndrome. This is supported by work which argues social aspects of work may be particularly problematic for those with Asperger syndrome (Richards, 2012). Previous research has demonstrated the importance of humour for individuals' enjoyment of work, and sense of belonging (Cooper, 2008). In contrast, the current study suggests humour at work can be a disabling practice. Organizations must carefully consider their informal cultures to ensure that practices which support employee enjoyment of work, for example humour, can be maintained without marginalising certain groups of employees. As such humour is a workplace practice which can both facilitate feelings of inclusion at work for some, while marginalising non-hegemonic employees.

While homosociality may disadvantage some disabled men, for others it provides some advantage through informal networks with other men offering recruitment opportunities, at least for a number of the older men. This study suggests that the formalisation of recruitment practices may not offer a move towards gender equality as suggested in previous work (Reskin, 2000; Whiting, 2012). Rather, formalisation may exacerbate the disadvantage experienced by employees for whom formalised practices are disabling. There are implications for efforts within organisations to overcome

inequalities, which may support one group of workers, for example women, while unintentionally discriminating against another non-hegemonic group of workers. Those with responsibility for diversity management need to be aware of the complexities of (in)equalities in the workplace. The data presented here shows that men and women's experiences are not homogenous, and disabled employees' experiences are also heterogeneous and affected by gender. Organisations which aim to create a diverse and inclusive workplace must be sensitive to how working practices may be gendered and ableist, and consequently perpetuating inequalities.

That disabled people are disproportionately affected by austerity measures is well documented (Goodley et al., 2014). While previous work has focussed on those disabled people who are not in employment, the data presented here suggests that cuts to the transport sector affect relatively privileged disabled men who are in employment. Specifically, the financial cuts evident within the transport sector are changing working practices, for example, loss of medically restricted roles, add a further layer to disabling of employees with "impairments". The data also suggests age may affect experiences, with younger men reporting few opportunities for informal recruitment methods to overcome the difficulties they experienced. Studies addressing the impact of age on disability (Warner and Brown, 2011), or intergenerational effects, help to explain how disability, gender and age interact, along with the changing organisation of work.

Just as gender is relational, resulting from gender practices (Connell, 2012), the data suggests disability is relational. Men in the current study felt visible "impairments" were more readily accommodated. In addition, the current study drew on those identified as having a neurological "impairment", necessitating both diagnosis and identification with this term. Further research needs to explore the heterogeneity of experiences of disabled employees, particularly how type of "impairment" affects the construction of difference within the workplace. Given evidence of complex relationships between masculinity and disability, further work is needed to understand the differences between men (Courtenay, 2000), for example, extending research to identify shared and different experiences between blue and white collar workers. Such work may examine ethnicity or social class to understand

how these social identities intersect with gender and disability (Cheslack-Postava and Jordan-Young, 2012) to impact the experience of work. In addition, different hidden "impairments" may be related to gender and disability in a variety of ways. For example, the current data suggests those with dyslexia fear being objects of office humour, while those with Asperger syndrome reported difficulty understanding social aspects of work. Future research should consider the workplace policy implications of such nuanced analyses, to understand the effects of reasonable adjustments. As the data suggests here, human resource management practices designed to reduce inequality for one section of the workforce, may create inequalities for others.

This paper contributes to the literature in two key ways. Firstly, it adds to understandings of the experiences of disabled men and women in male dominated occupations. It reveals experiences are complex for those with hidden "impairments", although marginalisation is evident. The complexities of (in)equality are revealed through practices which marginalise some disabled women and men, also offering opportunities for other disabled men. Secondly, the paper demonstrates drawing on social relational models of gender and disability helps to understand the gendered and ableist aspects of working practices. Just as homosociality can be seen as a gender practice, related to hegemonic masculinity (Collinson and Hearn, 1994; Nentwich and Kelan, 2014), the current study suggests it is also an ableist practice. This study suggests understandings of disabled men's experiences of work, and the maintenance of gendered inequalities at work benefit from drawing on both gender and disability theorising. Doing so help reveal not only gender practices within organisations and the workplace which underpin hegemonic masculinity, but also ableist practices (Campbell, 2008; Onken and Slaton, 2000) which marginalise disabled men, and maintain a hierarchy of masculinities.

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